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Marginalia

Muscovite Princes and Monasterial Privileges

HORACE W. DEWEY

WHY was it that Moscow kept granting fiscal immunities to monasteries in the 16th century? Some of the recipients were already immensely wealthy, and Moscow's rulers always needed more money, yet the Autocrats of All Rus' repeatedly issued charters which exempted individual monasteries from taxes and other payments to the state's coffers.

In the first part of his article on 'The Centralised State and Feudal Immunities in Russia', (see above, pp. 234–54) S. M. Kashtanov seems to be reaffirming the theory of diminishing immunities, long popular with Marxist and non-Marxist scholars alike.[1] According to this theory, immunities were originally 'attributes of landed property'—broad attributes which were subsequently whittled down by the growing princely authority. Thus a private land-holder like the semi-legendary boyar Kuchka (who once held a fine estate where Moscow now stands) enjoyed wide powers over the tillers of his land, collecting tribute from them, dispensing justice to them and generally administering their affairs.[2] But then the ruling princes usurped the land-holders' 'attributes', sometimes directly and aggressively, sometimes more subtly. In the latter case, a prince would give land to a boyar or monastery, 'granting' the donee fiscal and judicio-administrative 'privileges' and exempting him from the jurisdiction of the prince's own fiscal agents, judges and administrators. What had originally been 'attributes' of landed property, enjoyed by the landholder as a matter of course, now turned into 'privileges' or 'immunities', expressly authorised by the prince in his charter to the landholder; and the princes kept authorising less and less. Put differently, the landholders' privileges and immunities kept diminishing as the princely charters imposed more and more limitations.

At first this process was quite uneven. But by the 1480s, Kashtanov suggests, the history of Russian immunities had entered a new phase. Ivan III had apparently adopted a uniform policy, granting few important immunities to any landholder, secular or ecclesiastical. Had this policy continued, immunities might have diminished to the point of vanishing a few decades later.

Then something went wrong. Ivan III himself failed in his attempts to

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[1] For a survey of this theory by a distinguished pre-revolutionary scholar, see N. P. Pavlov-Sil'vansky, *Feodalizm v udel'noy Rusi*, St Petersburg, 1910, pp. 291–308.

[2] I. D. Belyayev tries to identify the historical kernel of the Kuchka legends in 'Skazaniya o nachale Moskvy' (*Russkiy vestnik*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1868, pp. 15–20).

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secularise monastic lands. And instead of carrying on a consistently restrictive policy, Ivan's successors again began—intermittently, at least—to grant substantial privileges and immunities to monasteries. Moscow's rulers were less generous to secular landholders, and even the ecclesiastical recipients went through some lean years. A number of monasteries, however, fared handsomely in the 16th century.

Kashtanov's article documents these developments quite clearly. His explanation for them seems to be less clear: Ivan III's successors failed to keep up that monarch's restrictive policy because there was no 'uniform, homogeneous law for those holding immunities'—a situation which Kashtanov ascribes to the 'transitional nature' of the era (political autocracy was mixed with economic fragmentation). Such observations offer little insight to the student who has never read anything else on old Russian immunities. Are there no other, more specific explanations for the monastic charters' failure to bear out the theory of diminishing immunities in the 16th century?

There are some plausible answers to this question in Kashtanov's recent book, *Sotsial'no-politicheskaya istoriya Rosii kontsa XV—pervoy poloviny XVI v.* (Moscow, 1969).[3] It seems pointless to discuss Kashtanov's article without also referring to his book, as they go together. In the book he analyses a large number of charters and suggests the rulers' motives for issuing them. The texts themselves rarely state the real reasons; like their West European counterparts, most Russian *gramoty* purport to be manifestations of royal magnanimity, and nothing else;[4] but few Russian princes issued charters of immunity simply out of the kindness of their hearts; some sort of *quid pro quo* generally lay behind these documents; when making such grants, the princes expected something in return. Kashtanov, after studying the charters in their temporal and geographical settings, suggests that the princely objective was usually political. That is, by granting immunities to a monastery, a prince hoped to win that monastery's support against some adversary who was challenging the prince's authority. The threat of feudal separatism remained strong, precisely because Ivan III had failed to secularise monastic estates.[5]

Kashtanov's book contains many examples to illustrate this point. After the death of Vasily III, to mention one case, Vasily's brother Andrey Staritsky planned to acquire territory formerly held by the Volotsky princes. Moscow disapproved of Andrey's territorial ambitions and 'neutralized' them by granting a number of charters (in the name of Vasiliy's son, the infant Ivan IV) to the largest 'feudal landholder' in the area—the Monastery of Joseph of Volokolamsk.[6] With that great 'corporation' solidly in Moscow's camp, Andrey had little local support for his plans. Moscow again used charters of immunity against Andrey in 1537.

[3] Two fairly detailed reviews of this important work have appeared in English: one by John Fennell in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, N.F. vol. 16, fasc. 2, June 1968, pp. 286–291, the other by John V. A. Fine, Jr., in *Kritika*, no. 2, Winter 1969, pp. 13–30.

[4] Pavlov-Sil'vansky, *Feodalizm v udel'noy Rusi*, pp. 282–3. Charters issued by the princes of Tver' were notable exceptions; as Pavlov-Sil'vansky points out, they used a 'for-the-salvation-of-our-souls' formula similar to that found in some Frankish charters.

[5] Kashtanov, *Sotsial'no-politicheskaya istoriya*, pp. 197–8, 238.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 290.

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Describing the events of that year, Kashtanov says that the charters disclose 'what is not to be found in the chronicles', namely a consistent, single-minded course of political action by the government. By issuing the documents to 'great feudal lords' who were Andrey's neighbours, Moscow isolated Andrey and deprived him of his neighbours' support.[7]

Kashtanov's research has much merit. He has made a more thorough use of charters of immunity as historical sources than any other scholar, and he convinces the reader that political considerations frequently accounted for the decision to issue a charter.

It seems to me, however, that there remain certain anomalies if we look only at the political side. Indeed, two incompatible images of Ivan III himself seem to emerge from Kashtanov's analysis. One image resembles the well-known Ivan, the true autocrat who dealt harshly with persons suspected of insubordination or 'conspiracy'. This Ivan, at the height of his power, treated his sons and grandson with a free and heavy hand, promoting them or demoting them, sending them about the country or confining them under guard.[8] Can this be the same man whom Kashtanov portrays on other pages of his book as a fidgety feudal father, anxiously struggling to hold his realm together and granting immunities to win monastic support in the face of filial insurrection?[9] Perhaps, yet one would somehow expect Ivan to deal with the problem more resolutely. Kashtanov suggests elsewhere that Ivan IV granted immunities to some Muscovite monasteries (in 1546) with a view to offsetting the political influence of Vladimir Staritsky and the Shuysky clan in certain appanage territories and in Novgorod. When examining the terms of Ivan's grants, however, their modest scope and short duration becomes clear.[10] Were these mean little charters really intended to perform the important role which Kashtanov attributes to them? Or did Moscow have something else in view?

There were other, non-political motives for issuing charters of immunity. Three categories come to mind: economic, military and 'spiritual' motives. Economic and military considerations, it is true, frequently coexisted with political ones. A prince whose primary aim was economic assistance (e.g., when he issued immunities to help a monastery restore its estates after a fire or a devastating Tatar raid)[11] might also reap political benefits (e.g., the increased 'loyalty' of the abbot and the brethren). And when a prince granted land with generous fiscal immunities to a monastery in an area where Russians frequently clashed with Crimean or Kazan' Tatars, political and military objectives may have mingled.[12]

More prominent than either economic or military objectives were perhaps the 'spiritual' reasons which led Moscow's Orthodox princes to grant immunities to monasteries. Religious motivations for issuing charters receive virtually no attention from Kashtanov, either in his article or his book; but such motivations would fully merit the same systematic research which Kashtanov has devoted to the political aspects of Old Russian immunities.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 319. [8] *Ibid.*, pp. 33–39, 65, 90–102, 123, 168–9, 174–5.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 76–7, 87, 115–17, 145–54, 182–4, 186, 212, 215–18.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 362–3. [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 269, 271, 332.
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 360, 368–9.

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The extent and character of monastic initiatives in soliciting immunities, for example, remain unclear. How often did the religious organisations themselves request fiscal immunities? What arguments did they use? It is known that Moscow frequently granted charters in response to monastic petitions (*chelobitiya* or *chelobitnyye*). Hearing such petitions, the monarch was acting not only as the supreme dispenser of justice (with the charters as documents of *lex priva*) but as the Orthodox sovereign as well. In a particularly devout mood he might grant the requested *gramota* for the asking. On other occasions he would need additional persuasion. It is a pity that not more texts of monastic petitions have survived from the 15th and 16th centuries, for one can learn many things from Old Russian *chelobitnyye*. Sophisticated petitioners, after making their formulaic statements of humility, knew how to appeal to the sovereign's self-interest. In urging him to grant them relief, they would try to show him how it would redound to his own benefit. Texts of monastic petitions for immunities might have shed much light on types of motivation for issuing the charters.

But there were surely occasions when monasteries received substantial immunities even without asking for them. Such grants were the offerings of pious Orthodox rulers who revered their Church, or wanted to stay on its good side by doing something for it, or who were suddenly concerned for the welfare of their souls. In any event, the clergy was to pray and intercede for them, in this life and especially the next. Put crudely, the *quid pro quo* here took the form of immunities in return for assistance toward immortality.

Kashtanov mentions events which would seem to bear out this practice, but he uses them to make other points. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that Ivan III granted charters of immunity to the Monastery of St Cyril of Beloozero while composing his draft will (1500/1501).[13] But it seems more likely that the sixty-three-year-old Ivan began earnestly thinking about the salvation of his soul after the illness which suddenly struck him in late July 1503 (about two years before his death). Ivan recovered from this illness, but gave up his attempts to secularise church lands (some observers, indeed, regarded his affliction as God's punishment for the attempts at secularisation)[14] and turned anew to the business of compiling his will.[15] And in 1504, still more significantly, Ivan issued a series of charters of immunity for lands held by the Metropolitan![16] 'Spiritual' motives seem to be at work here, but Kashtanov does not think so: to him these grants were but a political manoeuvre, designed to keep the Metropolitan on Ivan's side in his dispute with his son Vasily.[17]

Muscovite rulers sometimes bestowed favours upon monasteries in an effort to atone for past sins. A notable example was Ivan IV, who had reason to fear that his crimes would be held against him on judgment

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90, 194.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
[16] Akademiya nauk SSSR. Institut istorii. *Akty feodal'nogo zemlevladeniya i khozyaystva XIV–XVI vekov*, vol. I, Moscow, 1951, nos. 70, 113, 134, 150, 224, 311, 313. Cf. Kashtanov, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
[17] Kashtanov, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

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day.[18] In my opinion, Vasily had similar fears in 1522, when he granted lands with fiscal immunities to various monasteries 'in memory of Prince Dmitry Ivanovich',[19] who had once been his rival and against whom, according to persistent rumours, Vasily had indeed sinned.[20]

Kashtanov's carefully documented study is valuable because it shows that caution must be used in applying a 'theory of diminishing immunities' to 16th-century Muscovite practice. The Soviet scholar's contributions are also helpful in bringing out the political motives for granting fiscal immunities, since these motives help us to understand the immunities' up-and-down, zigzag course of evolution. Reading Kashtanov, however, the impression emerges that this course of evolution, so puzzling at first glance because of its irregularity, was almost exclusively a product of political considerations; for him the political *quid pro quo* is the only one that seems to matter. In my opinion there were other sources of motivation—'spiritual' sources in particular—which can help to explain the Muscovite princes' readiness to issue fiscal immunities to monasteries, although such a practice meant the loss of state revenue. Certainly the other, non-political aspects of the Muscovite grants deserve further study.

[18] See, for example, S. B. Veselovsky, *Issledovaniya po istorii oprichniny*, Moscow, 1963, pp. 337–42, and sources cited. Kashtanov lists over five hundred immunity charters issued during the reign of Ivan IV in 'Khronologicheskiy perechen' immunitetnykh gramot XVI veka', *Arkheograficheskiy yezhegodnik za 1960 god*, Moscow, 1962, pp. 129–200. Although he states (on p. 129) that the years 1561–1579 saw a particular increase in the number of immunity charters issued, and that a 'transitional period' with fewer immunities followed, he lists dozens of charters benefiting monasteries which appeared in the years 1580–1584.

[19] Kashtanov, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

[20] S. von Herberstein, *Commentaries on Muscovite Affairs*, O. P. Backus, ed. and trans., Lawrence, 1956, p. 11. Cf. G. Vernadsky, *Russia at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, New Haven, 1959, p. 133.

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